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SPECIAL SERIES : BEHIND FINDING NEMO

Diving Down Into Nemo's World

Interview with Lee Unkrich, co-director of the movie

by Valeria De Napoli, staff writer

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Lee Unkrich is the co-director of the upcoming digitally-animated movie coproduced by Disney and Pixar called Finding Nemo, which will be released on May 30. Unkrich has been working at Pixar Animation Studios for nine years. He started as a film editor for Toy Story and A Bug's Life ; then he co-directed with John Lasseter for Toy Story 2 and with Pete Docter for Monsters Inc. . In this interview, he talks about his career at Pixar, the behind-the-scenes of the making of Finding Nemo, his relationship with the director, Andrew Stanton, and his plans for the future.

Q: When did you start working for Pixar?

A: I just had my ninth anniversary here at Pixar two weeks ago. I was originally hired to work on Toy Story as a film editor just for a short time, four weeks to six weeks, and I ended up hitting it off with John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton, and here I am. At the time, I was interested in editing live action movies and I thought that animated movies were garbage, because as far as I was concerned I thought that the only good animation was done at Disney. But then I heard that John Lasseter was making an animated movie here, and so I decided to come here in the Bay Area and work with him.

Q: Editing an animated movie was different from live action?

A: When I came to Pixar I didn't know how animated features were made. The first thing I learned was that in animation you make the movie actually before the movie is made, because we storyboard the whole movie before the animation happens. Then we edit the storyboards together in the computer with sound effects, music and dialogue and we create a rough draft of the movie. We have animated reels that you can watch. We spend a few years just working on the storyboard version of the movie because it's cheaper than animation, (which) requires a lot of time and money. You don't want to start animating unless you have a hard-rock solid movie.

Q: What does a director do in animation?

A: It's more similar to what a director of live action movies does than people imagine. We are all concerned about the same things. You are trying to tell a good story and make a good movie. We work with actors: not only the actors who provide voices for the animated characters. But also animators are actors, because they are creating the physical performances of the characters.

Q: What kind of challenges did you face with making Finding Nemo ?

A: Finding Nemo is set underwater but in many different set locations. Definitely this movie had more challenging scenes than all the other

PHOTO

Lee Unkrich, co-director of Pixar's latest release "Finding Nemo," pauses for a portrait in front of pre-production drawings of the film.



Johanna Luddy | staff photographer

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movies we made at Pixar. We had to solve the technical challenge of dealing with water. Water is one of the most difficult things to make in computer graphics. We did a lot of tests about the physics of water. We wanted the underwater world, where the movie is set, to look as realistic as possible and believable for the audience.

Q: Was it difficult directing fish?

A: It was very challenging for the animators to work with fish, because so much of animation has to do with expressing emotions since fish don't have hands and a whole body to give the attitude and can't be that expressive. So we studied dogs and how they express their emotion using their eyes, so all our characters have very expressive eyebrows and eyes. Their acting comes from the eyes.

Q: Is the movie close to the original script?

A: Finding Nemo is close at its heart to the original script written by Andrew Stanton (the director of the movie). In the original conception of the movie when Nemo is taken away and put into the fish tank in the dentist office, he was really mad at his father and he was happy to be far from his father and he didn't want to go home. Then we realized that it was a storyline that was too long, and we decided only to focus on the Marlin's quest to find his son Nemo. Marlin is an overprotective father, afraid of the risks that his son may find out there in the depths of the ocean. In the course of the film, when he's joined by Dory, an optimistic companion, he learns not to be so afraid of what is out there.

Q: What was the genesis of Finding Nemo ?

A: Andrew Stanton had been thinking about making a movie about fish for years. And he had this idea of having a scene with a fish in a fish tank in a dentist's office, but he didn't know how to make an animated feature out of it. One day he was walking with his son Ben through the neighborhood. Ben was running around and Andrew was spending the whole time warning his son of being careful, and then he realized that he was not enjoying the moment. But he was just worrying about his son instead. So he thought that this feeling could be an interesting thing to explore in a movie-- the relationship between father and son-- and that's the genesis of the movie.

Q: What's your next project?

A: After a break this summer, I'll be co-directing with John Lasseter the movie Cars which will come after Nemo. I love working with John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton and Pete Docter as a co-director, because we are all very close. And we all have the same tastes creatively. The relationship between director and co-director is like the relationship between Batman and Robin. Batman is still running the show, but he cannot do it without Robin.

Q: What will change in the future Pixar movies?

A: We will keep on making technical improvements, but the story will always have top priority here at Pixar. Even though other film companies are making computer graphics movies, Pixar films will always be unique and special.

Q: Do you think that you will keep on working for Pixar?

A: Someday I'll go back to work on live action movies. But not anytime soon, because I love working here and I like the people I work with. I feel that I'm working on something special. The movies we made, they are classics. For now I'm happy here.

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